

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 453 469

CG 030 948

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TITLE The Mind and The Unconscious--A Modification of Freud's Agencies.
PUB DATE 2001-04-00
NOTE 26p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Processes; Mental Health; Personality Assessment; *Personality Theories; *Psychiatry
IDENTIFIERS *Freud (Sigmund); Unconscious Processing

ABSTRACT

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The Mind and The Unconscious – A Modification of Freud's Agencies

Manuela H. Habicht

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1. Introduction

It is an interesting fact that the concept of the unconscious is altogether absent from Freud's initial attempt at formulating a psychoanalytic theory of both normal and abnormal processes. Particularly surprising is the fact that the concept of the unconscious is absent from Freud's early formulations of the theory of psychopathology of defense and symptom-formation, for it is here the hypothesis of a 'psychical unconscious' will ultimately resume the role of indispensable, theoretical postulate. The fact of such absence, however, should in no way serve as an indication of conflict between what would ultimately become the Freudian unconscious and early psychoanalytic theory. It is quite to the contrary. The conception of the psychical unconscious is so near the surface in the early works, that it is virtually impossible for it not to be read in – a fact which undoubtedly explains why most students of psychoanalysis usually overlook it, or at any area, not comment upon its absence.

The concept of a psychical unconscious, at the first stage of psychoanalytic reasoning, is not one, which Freud himself employed, although it was certainly available to him at the time. The term unconscious does not appear in the *Neuro-psychoses of Defence*, a theoretical central work of the early period (Freud, 1894). In addition, the lack of systematic and deliberate employment of the concept of an unconscious, on Freud's part, seems to be indicated by the fact that such occurrences of the word "unconscious" as there are, in the early works, differ widely in meaning, ranging from the commonplace to the technical. Finally, a third and related point consists in the fact that there where the word "unconscious" does appear, it is for the most part inserted into the text by Freud in a manner which could only be described as *off-hand* (Breuer & Freud, 1925). Pre-topical instances of the word occur in the *Studies of Hysteria* where it is found in a number of

essentially dissimilar contexts and is either used as a passing reference to something with which the reader is already familiar (“unconscious suggestion; “unconscious love) or else, as a casual and wholly dispensable reference which at the time were considered by Freud to be more appropriately couched in other terms.

In contrast to the concept of the *unconscious* that was introduced very late, the idea that the mind is composed of separate structures, agencies, or systems occupied a major position in Freud's theories from first to last. Its first version is to be found in chapter seven of *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). In the *Interpretation of Dreams* Freud postulated two systems which he called the systems *unconscious* (Ucs.) and the system *preconscious – conscious* (Pcs.-Cs.). In 1923 in *the Ego and the Id* Freud replaced these with the alternative categories *id*, *ego*, and *superego*. The following paper will therefore explore what the mind must be like for the psychoanalytic term like “the unconscious” to be meaningfully applied.

2. Freud's view on the composition of the mind

As pointed out in the introduction Freud postulated two systems. He believed that the *unconscious* was made up of wishes dating from childhood. He assumed it to function as a primary process that was inaccessible to *consciousness*. In contrast the Pcs.-Cs. was in control of planned behavior, emotional expression, and consciousness and functioned as a secondary process. Freud decided to revise these aspects of his theory of mind two decades later in *the Ego and the Id* (1923) where he postulated the three structures known as ego, superego and the id. In 1900, and for many years thereafter, it seems to be important to point out that both structures fitted in with Freud's understanding at the time of the nature of pathogenic conflict, a conflict that arose between what is accessible to the consciousness and what is inaccessible to the consciousness. Many years later he realized that because defenses are often inaccessible to consciousness and what is defended against might be, at least in part be accessible to consciousness, his formulation might well only be a rough approximation.

The proposal of an agency or structure called the id instead of the unconscious indicated the presence of a demonic part of the mind. The id was assumed to be the strange, unfamiliar part that drove the individual to seek instinctual gratification, including gratification of wishes of which one has no conscious knowledge and/or one strenuously rejects or denies. Freud (1923) pointed out that like the Ucs, then, the id is made up of derivatives. The difference between the id and the unconscious is largely termino-logic, with the exception, noted previously, that the change in name takes into account the fact that, in situations of conflict, aspects of drive derivatives that are strenuously defended against may, at least at times, be accessible to consciousness.

The ego and the superego are structures that have been proposed by Freud in place of the Pcs-Cs. whatever a person is familiar with about oneself and what one consciously recognizes about oneself is included in the ego. Freud (1926) also included defense mechanisms that serve the purpose of warding off unwanted drive derivatives as part of the ego. The ego is conceived of as being logical, consistent, and coherent, all in contrast to the id, which is conceived of as its opposite in these respects.

He pointed out that when mental conflict occurs the id is to be placed on one side of the conflict and the ego is to be placed on the other assuming that there is a conflict between childhood sexual wishes and defense mechanisms. The “ego seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id.... For the ego perception plays the part which in the id falls to the drives” (Freud, 1923, p.25).

Freud's structural theory includes another agency that has to do with morality, the superego. He distinguished it from the other two as a result of his observation about mental conflict. He pointed out that there are conflicts between ego and superego that lead to an unconscious sense of guilt or need for punishment.

In summary Freud's structural theory initially divided the mind into agencies or structures that were opposed to one another in situations of mental conflict and that had different relations to external reality and to the drives.

2.1. Problems associated with Freud's structural theory

Freud (1923) pointed out that normal mental functioning depends on the existence of a strong, well-functioning, special mental structure, the ego, which must be well in control of the id if the mind is to function normally. He assumed that conflict arises together with a disturbance of mental functioning when the ego is weak relative to the id. This idea stands

in contrast to Arlow's (1969) view that every thought, even every perception gratifies one or more drive derivatives and does not take into account that mental conflict is a characteristic of normal mental functioning in the same way as it is a characteristic of abnormal mental functioning.

However we still seem to adhere to this model in our clinical work, because analytic progress means diminution, and eventually resolution of the above conflict. As the ego becomes stronger, the conflict is supposed to disappear. Following this theory it has to be concluded that if the conflicts persists that no substantial psychoanalytic progress has occurred. However clinical practice demonstrates that in the mind of every patient who by all other criteria has made substantial analytic progress, the conflict over what were originally pathogenic drive derivatives is likely to be still obvious and active. This means that the structural theory is not sufficient in explaining what psychoanalysis can achieve and focuses on the resolution of the conflict rather than an alteration of the conflict in the direction of normality. Brenner (1976, 1982) also criticized the above fact and pointed out that in a successful psychoanalysis normal compromise formation is put in place of the pathological one that was present before. He continued his criticism by pointing out that there is an additional drawback to the structural theory in clinical practice with respect to the moral functioning of the mind as well. Brenner (1982) argued that attributing morality to a special agency has led to distorted views of both the origin and the functioning of morality and has in consequence greatly hampered the assessment and the analysis of many conflicts to which the moral functioning of the mind gives rise. Technical aspects of superego analysis have so far only been discussed by very few analysts (Hoffman, 1992).

It is important to point out that our current knowledge about the ubiquity of mental conflict is at odds with the assumption that the mind is composed of separate agencies. It is

therefore necessary to assess whether changes should be suggested to the above theory to bring it into consonance with our knowledge about mental functioning and to determine whether these changes would contribute to the practice of psychoanalysis.

Brenner (1996) suggested that a mental conflict is the result people's efforts to achieve pleasure and avoid unpleasure at the same time. Drive derivatives, unpleasure associated with them, defense and moral demands as well prohibitions are the interacting components.

The structural theory postulates two drives, the libidinal and the aggressive one. It is Freud's view that there is no pleasure associated with satisfaction of aggression and that it operates silently in mental life (Brenner, 1982). In conflict its role is limited to self-punitive and self-destructive tendencies. However the libidinal drive is accompanied by pleasure and in Freud's view conflict is occasioned by the libidinal wishes only (Freud, 1926). These ideas are quite different from how aggression is viewed at present. Hartman, Kris & Loewenstein (1949) considered libido and aggression to be the same in respect to pleasure premium as well as with respect to their roles in conflict. The satisfaction of both wishes is accompanied by pleasure and the wishes can give rise to conflict. Brenner (1982) pointed out that when unpleasure arises in association with a drive derivative of childhood origin, a person's mind functions in such a way as to minimize the unpleasure while at the same time permitting as much gratification to the drive derivative as is compatible with not too much unpleasure. Defense plays a role in each of these compromise formations and serves to diminish unpleasure. The ideational content of unpleasure includes Freud's (1926) calamities of childhood: object love, loss of love, genital loss or castration, and punishment. Parental disapproval, in the child's mind, can include the first three. Therefore what is right or wrong, in the child's mind, morally speaking, is what the parents say which

led Brenner (1996) to suggest that the structural agency of the superego should become a special category of the calamity of parents disapproval. Brenner (1996) differentiates between object loss and parental disapproval and agrees with Rothstein (1994) that the parental judgement of a child's wish to be morally wrong can cause guilt and shame which can play a major role in mental life and development.

Brenner (1996) suggest that the idea that the mind is divided into an *ego* that deals with one's relation to reality and an *id* that does not, should be dispensed. Following Brenner's view of the pleasure/unpleasure principle one can also refer to Biven (1986) who pointed out that one perceives whatever one senses permit one to perceive and that any deception of reality is a compromise formation. In context to one's relation to reality Brenner (1996) explains the ego's integrative function as a cultural phenomenon and uses the concern for logic and coherence as an example to explain compromise formation that conforms to the pleasure/unpleasure principle.

In addition to using the terms unconscious and ego, Freud (1923) used the terms primary and secondary process. In reviewing his idea of the mind it becomes clear that he perceived childish mental functioning as pathological when it affects conscious thought and behavior in adult life. He pointed out that if childhood drive derivatives are dealt with immaturely, in accordance with primary process functioning, then they are pathogenic. Brenner (1996) pointed out that Freud was right in his belief that childhood drive derivatives persist throughout one's lifetime, but criticized his view that if the conflicts to which they gave rise in childhood persist throughout life that this is seen as pathological because childish ways of thinking (primary process thoughts) are as much part of normal mental functioning as they are of pathological mental functioning.

It seems as if Freud (1923) has made an attempt to differentiate health and illness in mental life on the basis of maturity versus immaturity of thought processes. However in Brenner's (1982) view the distinction is more complex and less clear than Freud or others would like to think. Brenner (1982) stated that compromise formation qualifies as normal if it allows for an adequate amount of pleasurable gratification of drive derivatives, if it does not arouse too much unpleasure, if it does not entail too much inhibition of function as a result of defense, and if it does not involve too much by way of self-injury and suffering from punishment for moral transgression.

3. Discussion

The paper has clearly demonstrated that significant changes have to be made to Freud's view about the mind for the psychoanalytic term like "the unconscious" to be meaningfully applied. The paper raises the question whether the mind should be divided into agencies at all. It is probably difficult to eliminate familiar concepts such as the unconscious, preconscious and conscious altogether, because they have served generations of psychoanalysts very well. It has shown that new concepts (pleasure/unpleasure) will serve better. Together with letting go of the idea that conflict is viewed as pathological we have to let go of the perception that the mind consists of two agencies of which one, the id, is constantly or periodically threatening to arouse mental conflict, while the other, the ego, had as its function the task of subduing and regulating drive derivatives in such a way to remain conflict free. The idea that it is the task of analysis to resolve the conflict if the ego becomes involved in pathogenic conflict needs to be reviewed because we know that conflicts are not resolved in that sense. We know that they are as much part of normal mental functioning as they are of pathological mental functioning. It can therefore be concluded that the idea of separate mental agencies including the unconscious is untenable. In conclusion of the paper it should be pointed out that the revisions that Brenner (1998) proposed bear the same relation to the structural theory as did that theory to the earlier set of generalizations that is called topographic theory. And as Freud himself said more than once, scientific theories are like scaffolding. When they are no longer useful, one has to replace them by ones that better fit that one is attempting to order and explain (Brenner 1996).

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